

Behaviorism: an approach to the mind- body problem

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INTRODUCTION

We find an important approach to the age- long mind- body problem is behaviorism. According to behaviorism all that is true of man can be explained in terms of his behaviors which are physical in nature. Behaviorism thus cancels mind as a distinctive part of human being.

As we know, the mind-body problem consists in the difficulty of making related two entirely separate kinds of entities, viz, mind and body. Difficulty arises specifically because mind is regarded as essentially non-extended, while body is regarded as essentially extended. Now there are certain thinkers who try to settle this problem by arguing that there are really only physical entities so that the mind-body problem does not arise at all. These thinkers are called behaviorists.

Behaviorists deny existence of the mind altogether and reduce everything of man including his consciousness to his body. This line of thinking has its root in materialism which is one of the very oldest theories in this area.

Key words:

1. Materialism 2. Propositional attitudes 3. Mental dispositions 4. Pseudo – problem

Watson is recognized as founder of the behaviorist school of psychology. According to him, observation should be the true method of psychology and human's behavior is the vivid object of observation. He rejects introspection which is unable to furnish objective data required for psychological experiment and psychology should be based not on introspection but on observation. He opines that all human behavior can be explained as a set of responses to stimuli to which a person is subjected. It is maintained that knowing the causes of human behavior- which stimuli cause which responses – is sufficient to explain that behavior.

Thus Watson adopts stimulus-response model in order to explain each and every mental phenomenon. To him, thinking which called mental but actually is sub-vocal speech which is nothing but physical. Thus It is argued that every mental phenomenon can be reduced to physical states and processes.

There may be two types of account of consciousness. One is the first person account which comes from attending to how things are in one's own case. The third person account results from attending to how things are when someone else is conscious in some way. To put it in another way, the essence-specifying character of mental concepts is tied to their epistemology, ¹ i.e., how mental events are presented from the first and third – person perspectives determines their nature as revealed in the concepts applied from those perspectives. Thus from the first-person perspective, the fact of consciousness is what informs our conception of the nature of mental events, and it is consciousness which cannot possess any physical nature. From the third-person perspective, our idea of mental states is informed by the behavioral criteria we use to apply mental concepts to others; and criteria patterns of behavior also do not have physical essence in the brain- they are loosely connected with states of the brain for that to be feasible. The first-person perspective is more integral to sensation than to propositional attitudes, so this perspective will dominate in fixing our conception of the nature of sensation.

In case of propositional attitudes the third- person perspective is important in shaping our conception of these mental states. Here some principle of rationality operates in establishing the connection between the possession of propositional attitudes and the notion of rationality. In our ascription of propositional mental states we must always attend to the logical relations that hold among the attitudes ascribed, and so propositional attitude ascriptions are partly controlled by various normative considerations –i.e., what attitudes the person ought to have, given that he has others. These principles implicit in all thoughts about the thoughts of others, peculiar to the mental realm. Our ascription of physical states to a person's body and brain, on the other hand, requires no sensitivity to principles governing what physical states the person ought to be in, given that he is in certain other states. So, the propositional attitudes, by virtue of their constitutive involvement in the normative, are not the sort of states whose nature could be given in terms of physical states, in view of the indifference of the physical to the normative.

Behaviorism is a typical third-person account as it defines all expressions involving consciousness in terms of bodily behavior which can be observed in others as easily as in oneself. But the problem is that a person may be in a conscious state having sensation, thoughts and so on but may not be behaving in a noticeable way. He may be in pain, for example, without groaning or complaining. The behaviorists call those covert movements as opposed to overt movements. Our sense- organs can perceive overt behavior. The covert movements are not noticed either because they are so very slight or because they occur inside the body where they cannot be observed very easily. Thus, thinking, for example, can be associated with very slight movements of the lips, or more plausibly, with slight movements of the tongue or vocal chords.

The behaviorists attempt to explain everything in terms of behavior meaning thereby the publicly observable, measureable and recordable activities of the subjects themselves. The main objective of the behaviorists is to establish everything on the solid footing of science. To them science is the sole yardstick for reality or ontology. The scientific method is applicable only to physical movements and hence bodily movements are claimed to have reality or ontic status. On the other hand, consciousness or any mental state qua mental state has no reality as it cannot be an object of scientific investigation.

But the above account involves a number of difficulties. To begin with, it may be pointed out that science has certain limitations too. It cannot explain many things; for example, feeling of joy cannot be ascertained by scientific investigation. It is rather ensured by direct awareness of the subject concerned and 'awareness' fails to be a subject-matter of scientific study. So we should not claim that anything beyond the periphery of science has no objectivity.

In fact, it is often argued that since consciousness cannot be measured or weighed, photographed or otherwise recorded objectively by any scientific methodology, and since also it (consciousness) is experientially accessible only to a single individual, it simply must be systematically excluded from any scientific model. We have no conflict with the upholders of methodological behaviorism in so far as they take into account only observed events that can be verified empirically. But it would be unjust to conclude that, therefore, our consciousness is unreal. To say so would commit the fallacy of ' what my nets will not catch is not fish'.² we want to stress the point that science is competent in some particular area and hence we cannot gain knowledge in any area whatsoever on the footing of science.

Now, let us come to another problem of behaviorism. Recent work with drug curare, which produces temporary paralysis, indicates that even covert behavior may be absent during mental events. Patient with enough curare to produce complete muscular paralysis report, after the drug has worn off, that there is no absence of consciousness, sensations, thoughts, ability to think or the like, during paralysis. So it may not be possible to identify mental events with behavior in any sense, either overt or covert. Again, certain slight muscular movements in the vocal cord is found when people think. But his thought is not what the muscular movements in his vocal cords mean. So, the meaning of mentalistic terms cannot be analyzed in terms of actual behavior.

To save the position of the behaviorists, they introduce the concept of a disposition to behave. Dispositions are properties of things such that under certain circumstances the thing that has the dispositional property will undergo a certain change. For example, brittleness is a dispositional property. A thing is brittle if and only if under suitable circumstances it will shatter; that is why we handle brittle object with care. During the state of paralysis, though there are no physical movements covert or overt, still there is a disposition to behave. So to attribute consciousness or some particular state of consciousness is to attribute a disposition to behave in a particular way. And it is the behaviorists proposal that such behavior, even if cannot be explicitly described, constitutes being conscious.

According to the behaviorists, psychology as a science is only concerned with behavior, i.e., with what we do; this alone, they contend, can be accurately observed. Whether we think meanwhile, they tell us, cannot be known: in their observation of the behavior of human beings, they have not so far found any evidence of thought. “Where you might expect a chapter on “thought process” you come instead upon a chapter on The Language Habit”³. Behaviorists try to eliminate all the unobservable non-sensical mentalistic concepts from the realm of psychology.

The dispositional account of mind or consciousness propounded by the behaviorists obliterates the distinction between human being and the material object. In both the cases, the dispositional character is found (example stated earlier). To the behaviorists, the bodily expressions are the criteria of mental states.

According to the behaviorists, the mind- body problem is not a genuine problem - - a pseudo – problem .⁴ since mental state is easily explained in terms of behavior pattern, there is no problem to explain the relationship between mind and body. So, rather than solving the problem, the behaviorists claim to have dissolved it completely. Now, let us discuss some of the important problems concerning the theory of behaviorism. If all talk of the mental is to be reduced to descriptions of behavior, then there is no room for an explanation of the difference between a convincing actor and someone who is genuinely in agony. In case of pretention, there are bodily expressions but there are no corresponding mental states. In reply to this objection, the behaviorists point out that a dispositional analysis of someone pretending to be in pain is different from that of someone actually in pain. Although their behavior would be superficially of the same type, there would certainly be circumstances in which it would differ. For example, someone pretending to be in pain is unable to produce all the physiological accompaniments of pain – temperature changes, sweating and the like. Also, someone who is pretending to be in pain would respond very differently to pain-killing drugs from someone who is genuinely in pain. But the fact is that no matter what sort of behavior or behavioral dispositions we imagine as allegedly constituting a particular mental event, we can always imagine just that behavior or those dispositions without that mental event. We can imagine that behavior as coming from some other cause, or even as inexplicably spontaneous. Hence, behavior and behavioral dispositions do not furnish an exhaustive analysis of these mentalistic terms. There is some thing left out by such third-person account. It is surely a major criticism of the theory that it reduces the experiences of actually being in pain to simply having a disposition to Scream, wince, and say ‘I am in pain’ . There is something which it really feels like to be in pain, and this is an essential aspect of mental life, yet behaviorism ignores this.

To conclude, we may say that in case of other person behaviorism is a tenable thesis. But the case of anyone’s knowledge of his own mental states does not require his observation of his bodily expressions. My awareness of happiness is so primitive that it cannot be explained in terms of my physical expressions. Another point is that behaviorism as third-person account will not give us a correct account of mental events such as sensations. There seems to be purely contingent connection between such mental events and their casual antecedents, their behavior effects, and even behavioral dispositions. And therefore the third- person account will not do as an analysis of consciousness either. Hence behaviorism is not acceptable as a philosophical thesis.

The merit of behaviorism as a strong and historically deeply rooted thesis cannot be ignored, however, behaviorism has been teaching us to enlarge our understanding of ourselves through objective means, with the help of certain laws. But a close – knit behaviorism is inadequate, not comprehensive enough to provide us with a satisfactory solution of the age long mind – body problem.

Reference

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